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ABSTRACT

The current official policy of the California community colleges on grading prohibits the use of plus and minus symbols to modify a standard letter grade. Plus and minus grades may influence a student's grade point average (GPA) either through statistical effects or psychological effects on teachers and students. At its fall 1985 session, and again in fall 1987, the Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges requested that districts be permitted to decide upon whether to use the plus and minus symbols. The implementation of such a policy would require that the following issues be resolved: (1) some argue that there should be a uniform grading policy among all community colleges, while others argue for local discretion; (2) assigning a numerical value of 0.3 to pluses and minuses would work to the benefit of transfer students from districts that use the plus/minus designation; and (3) there are various ways that a minus grade could be treated in regard to "satisfactory completion" of course requirements, leading to problems of equity for students from different community colleges and between community colleges and transfer institutions. This report to the Board of Governors includes an analysis of the issue of "satisfactory completion" of courses and recommended revisions to the California Code of Regulations to implement a permissive use of pluses and minuses by districts. (JMC)

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PLUS AND MINUS GRADING

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Prepared as Agenda Item Number 9 at a meeting of the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges (Sacramento, CA, September 14-15, 1989).

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PLUS AND MINUS GRADING 9

Second Reading, Action Scheduled

Background

The California Community Colleges are required by Title 5, Section 55758, to use an A-F grading scale. Pluses and minuses are not allowed. The Academic Senate has requested that the regulation be changed to allow districts to use plus and minus symbols that have specific numeric values in calculating grade point averages.

Prior to 1980, there was no prohibition against plus and minus grades. During the 1970s, grading practices were very diverse, and a study group was appointed in 1979 to recommend new statewide policies. In 1980, the Board of Governors adopted new grading regulations recommended by that group. These regulations preclude plus and minus grades.

None of the three other segments of public education in California has a statewide restriction on the use of pluses and minuses. Most, but not all, campuses of the University of California and the California State University use plus and minus grades, and those that do weigh them in computing students' grade point averages. California high schools have varying practices: some use whole grades only; some use plus and minus affixes with grade point values; some use plus and minus grades without grade point values. Most other states have no statewide policy on whether community colleges may use pluses and minuses.

At its fall 1985 session, and again in fall 1987, The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges called for a study of the issue of using pluses and minuses by faculty in course grades. The Senate also requested that the use of plus and minus symbols be "permissive," so that each district could decide whether or not to use them.

During the past year, Academic Senate policy recommendations on plus/minus grading made their way through the Consultation Process. After review through the Consultation Process, staff now recommends that districts be allowed to adopt plus/minus grading policies at their discretion.

This item was discussed by the Board at its July 13-14 meeting. At least one member raised a concern that local academic senates ought to have an explicit role in district

decisions to use or not use the plus/minus option. The Board policy, as proposed by staff, does not provide an explicit role for local academic senates.

Analysis

Plus and minus grades may influence a student's grade point average (GPA) either through statistical effects or through psychological effects on teachers and students. Mathematical modeling shows that statistical effects are likely to be small. The effects of chance tend to even out in averaging grade points; each minus (-) may be counterbalanced by a plus (+), and the greater the number of courses taken, the less likely it is that pure chance will have a significant effect on the GPA. Data from two colleges that converted to the plus/minus scale show that teachers give substantially more B+'s than B-'s, C+'s than C-'s, and D+'s than D-'s. Nevertheless, at these two colleges, grade point averages dropped slightly. This appeared to be due in large part to conversion of A's into A-'s.

The implementation of this policy requires resolution of the following:

1. *State Mandate vs. Local Control*

   Some argue that there should be a uniform grading policy among all community colleges. To implement this policy, the regulation would require all colleges to use plus/minus grades.

   Others argue for local discretion in the use of plus/minus affixes in grading. Given the basic role of the Board of Governors as set forth in Section 70901 of the *Education Code*, and given that mandatory application of the policy would impose a new State-mandated cost, staff recommends that districts be given the authority to use or not use plus/minus grades.

2. *Numerical Values for the Plus/Minus Affixes*

   Many colleges and universities, including all California State University campuses, assign a specific value of 0.3 to plus and minus affixes. A comparable policy among community college districts that choose to use plus and minus grades could work to the benefit of many transfer students in terms of the grade point average required for admission to upper division status and oversubscribed majors. Staff therefore recommends that districts that use plus and minus grades apply a fixed value of 0.3 to the plus/minus symbols.

3. *Satisfactory Completion of Courses*

   To obtain an associate degree, a community college student must satisfactorily complete designated courses. Similar "satisfactory completion" requirements exist for obtaining a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution. There are

different ways a minus grade could be treated in regard to such requirements, possibly resulting in inequitable treatment of transfer students who have performed comparably in terms of grades. At its July meeting, the Board requested additional information on this issue. A discussion of satisfactory completion requirements is therefore included as Appendix A.

Consistent with its other recommendations, staff proposes that districts be allowed to determine whether a minus grade meets satisfactory completion requirements that previously called for a whole-letter grade.

Recommended Action

That the Board of Governors adopt Title 5 regulatory language to implement a permissive use of plus and minus grades by districts, as provided in Appendix B.

If the Board approves such language, staff will commence the regulatory process to formally initiate the change. Staff also suggests that the Board request the Academic Senate to explore with the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates the feasibility of developing an intersegmental policy that defines "satisfactory completion" of coursework.

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APPENDIX A

Satisfactory Completion and Minus Grades

To earn an associate degree, a community college student must satisfactorily complete designated courses. Similar "satisfactory completion" requirements exist for a bachelor's degree at the four-year institution to which that student transfers. Course requirements differ from among community colleges, but are broadly of three types:

1. General education or breadth requirements (i.e., a required distribution of courses from among the major divisions of knowledge);

2. Institutional or systemwide requirements for demonstrating competency in a specific discipline (e.g., the requirement in Board of Governors regulations that every recipient of an associate degree demonstrate competency in reading, writing, and mathematics); and

3. Major and prerequisite requirements (e.g., a departmental requirement that every music major satisfactorily complete "Basic Music Theory" before advancing to courses in music composition).

The definition of "satisfactory completion" for degree purposes is locally determined in large part, and varies throughout the State. For instance, many community colleges regard completion of a particular writing course with any passing grade as demonstrating competency in writing for graduation purposes. At these colleges, "D" is an acceptable grade. Other community colleges, however, require at least a "C" for the same purpose. In the four-year segments, requirements vary not only from campus to campus, but among departments. For instance, one engineering program at a particular CSU campus recently raised the minimum-grade requirement in its prerequisite calculus course from a "C-" to a "C."

There are two areas where problems might arise in regard to "satisfactory completion" if pluses and minuses were added to the grading scale: equity for students among different community colleges; and between community colleges and four-year colleges in the processes of transfer.

For instance, when some community colleges use pluses and minuses and others do not, the following hypothetical situation could arise:

> College A, which uses "+/-" grading, sets its satisfactory completion standard for American Institutions 1 at "C-." A student takes the course in his or her first year and receives that grade, fulfilling the graduation requirement for the associate degree. The student moves to the neigh-

boring community and attempts to finish his or her associate degree at College B. That college, however, has whole-letter grading only, and its policy is that American Institutions 1 must be completed with at least a "C." The student must take the course again in order to graduate.

This kind of equity question is most likely to arise regarding the distinction between a "C" and a "C-," but might also arise between a "D" and a "D-" at different campuses.

Problems might also arise for some transfer students. The central admissions offices of the two public four-year segments indicate that pluses and minuses are not taken into account, at most campuses, in calculating student GPA for admissions purposes. However, minus grades could affect a transfer student's career in regard to institutional or departmental requirements after he or she has been admitted. For instance, the student might have satisfactorily completed an English composition course or a major prerequisite course with a "C-" at a community college, but might be required to repeat the course because satisfactory completion is defined at the four-year college as a "C."

APPENDIX B

Section 55758 of Title 5, Part VI of the California Code of Regulations is amended to read:

55758. Academic Record Symbols and Grade Point Average.

(a) Grades from a grading scale shall be averaged on the basis of the point equivalencies to determine a student's grade point average. Except as authorized by subsection (b), the ~~The~~ highest grade shall receive four points, and the lowest grade shall receive 0 points, using only the following evaluative symbols:

Symbol	Definition	Grade Point
A	Excellent	4
B	Good	3
C	Satisfactory	2
D	Passing, less than satisfactory	1
F	Failing	0
CR	Credit (at least satisfactory–units awarded not counted in GPA)	
NC	No Credit (less than satisfactory, or failing–units not counted in GPA)	

(b) The governing board of a community college district may use "plus" and "minus" designations in combination with letter grades and may compute grade point averages taking plus and minus values into account. In said computations a plus shall be computed by adding .3 to the value assigned to the letter grade with which it is combined and a minus shall be computed by subtracting .3 from the value assigned to the letter grade with which it is combined, except that no grade point value shall be less than 0 or greater than 4.0.

(c) ~~(b)~~ The governing board for each community college district shall publish the point equivalencies for the grades used in ~~subsection (a)~~ subsections (a) and (b) of this section in the catalog or catalogs of that community college district as a part of its grading practices.

(d) ~~(c)~~ The governing board of each community college district may authorize the use under specified controls and conditions of only the following nonevaluative symbols:

Symbol	Definition
I	Incomplete:

Incomplete academic work for unforeseeable, emergency and justifiable reasons at the end of the term may result in an "I" symbol being entered in the student's record. The condition for the removal of the "I" shall be

stated by the instructor in a written record. This record shall contain the conditions for the removal of the "I" and the grade assigned in lieu of its removal. This record must be given to the student with a copy on file with the registrar until the "I" is made up or the time limit has passed. A final grade shall be assigned when the work stipulated has been completed and evaluated, or when the time limit for completing the work has passed.

The "I" may be made up no later than one year following the end of the term in which it was assigned.

The "I" Symbol shall not be used in calculating units attempted nor for grade points.

The governing board shall provide a process whereby a student may petition for a time extension due to unusual circumstances.

IP In progress: The "IP" symbol shall be used only in those courses which extend beyond the normal end of an academic term. It indicates that work is "in progress," but that assignment of an evaluative symbol (grade) must await its completion. The "IP" symbol shall remain on the student's permanent record in order to satisfy enrollment documentation. The appropriate evaluative symbol (grade) and unit credit shall be assigned and appear on the student's permanent record for the term in which the course is completed. The "IP" shall not be used in calculating grade point averages. If a student enrolled in an "open-entry, open-exit" course is assigned an "IP" at the end of an attendance period and does not re-enroll in that course during the subsequent attendance period, the appropriate faculty will assign an evaluative symbol (grade) in accordance with subsection (a) of this part to be recorded on the student's permanent record for the course.

RD Report Delayed: The "RD" symbol may be assigned by the registrar only. It is to be used when there is a delay in reporting the grade of a student due to circumstances beyond the control of the student. It is a temporary notation to be replaced by a permanent symbol as soon as possible. "RD" shall not be used in calculating grade point averages.

W Withdrawal: The governing board of a district which decides to provide a withdrawal procedure shall adopt a policy consistent with the following:

Withdrawal from a class or classes shall be authorized through the last day of the fourteenth week of instruction (or 75% of a term, whichever is less).

The governing board, however, may establish a final withdrawal date which prohibits withdrawal after a designated point in time between the end of the fourth week of instruction (or 30% of a term, whichever is less) and the last day of the fourteenth week of instruction (or 75% of a term, whichever is less). The academic record of a student who remains

in a class beyond the time allowed by district policy must reflect a symbol as authorized in Section 55758 of this part, other than a "W."

The governing board may by regulation authorize withdrawal from a class or classes in extenuating circumstances after the last day of the fourteenth week (or 75% of the term, whichever is less) upon petition of the student or his representative and after consultation with the instructor(s) or appropriate faculty. Extenuating circumstances are verified cases of accidents, illnesses or other circumstances beyond the control of the student.

No notation ("W" or other) shall be made on the academic record of the student who withdraws during the first four weeks or 30% of a term, whichever is less. The governing board may establish a period of time shorter than the first four weeks or 30% of a term, during which no notation shall be made.

Withdrawal between the end of the fourth week (or such time as established by the district) and the last day of the fourteenth week of instruction (or 75% of a term, whichever is less) shall be authorized after informing the appropriate faculty.

Withdrawal after the end of the fourteenth week (or 75% of a term, whichever is less) when the district has authorized such withdrawal in extenuating circumstances, after consultation with appropriate faculty, shall be recorded as a "W."

For purposes of withdrawal policies, the term "appropriate faculty" means the instructor of each course in question or, in the event the instructor cannot be contacted, the department chair or equivalent faculty officer.

The "W" shall not be used in calculating grade point averages, but excessive "W"s (as defined in Sections 55754 and 55756 of this part) shall be used as factors in probation and dismissal procedures.

Within these guidelines, criteria for withdrawal and the procedures to accomplish it shall be established by governing boards and published in college catalogs.

A district's responsibilities with respect to enrollment or attendance accounting shall not be modified or superseded in any way by adoption of a withdrawal policy.

NOTE: Authority cited: Sections 71020, 71025 and 71066, Education Code. Reference: Sections 72285 and 76000, Education Code.

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